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Who's protecting whom? *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*, a case in point in confronting self-censorship in the choice of young adult literature

Teacher self-censorship of literature for early adolescents deprives these students of opportunities for conversation and discovery at a crucial stage of their development

I will tell you something about stories.
They aren't just entertainment
Don't be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death.

You don't have anything
if you don't have stories.
(Silko, 1986, p. 2)

To be "educated" means to be allowed to think and wonder about ideas and their consequences; to be "indoctrinated" means to hear only about acceptable values, beliefs, and traditions of a group.
(Swiderek, 1996, p. 592)

In a democracy, building knowledge and developing understandings about the world are essential to the well-being of free individuals and to the communities in which they live and to which they are responsible (Pradl, 1996; Shannon, 1989; Taxel, 1995). Without such knowledge and understandings, a democratic society and its children are vulnerable to the forces that would undermine their freedom. Stories involving issues of social justice such as oppression and discrimination provide young adolescents with a window to the world and a mirror to the self (Huck, 1990). Through the

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window of literature, students have immediate access to the experiences of others beyond their own families, friends, neighbors, classmates, and teachers. By gazing into the mirror literature provides, students are able to reflect more deeply on their own lives and the forces that affect them (Johnson, 1997; Sims, 1982).

When teachers abandon their right and responsibility to select literature, they sacrifice their students to protect themselves. Self-censorship silences both teachers and students. This is particularly problematic at the middle level as early adolescents expend tremendous energy defining and redefining themselves and trying on various identities and roles. It is also at the middle level that students find controversial issues immediately compelling and, given the opportunity, "think and wonder about ideas and their consequences" (Swiderek, 1996, p. 592) willingly and eagerly.

Censorship from the outside, largely from parent groups, religious groups, and political groups, has always been a significant problem in the selection of school materials (Foerstel, 1994; Nilsen & Donelson, 1993). The various controversies over textbooks in California and Oregon in recent years have repeatedly made headlines in the United States (Nilsen & Donelson, 1993; Pyle, 1994). The focus of the majority of these censorship attempts has been to establish who holds the power to determine what is purchased and thus what content is made available for children to read in school libraries and classrooms. While few would argue with parents' rights to determine what is acceptable for their own children, the issue of choosing for all children is contentious. It is important for teachers, administrators, and school board members to help parents and other community members understand the difference between censorship and selection. Censorship is defined as follows in *The Literacy Dictionary: The Vocabulary of Reading and Writing* (Harris & Hodges, 1995):

1. Any attempt to limit access to ideas, however presented; especially, to limit the opportunity of others to read certain books or magazines or to see certain films or plays or portions of them.
2. The acts of an official responsible for examining books, films, plays, etc., to see whether they contain objectionable features. (p. 28)

Selection, however, is based on professional guidelines that

1. seek to include specific materials or methods,
2. are essentially affirmative,
3. intend to advise,
4. seek to educate, to increase access to ideas and information.

(McClure, 1995, p. 19)

The distinctions between censorship and selection become blurred, and self-censorship becomes all too prevalent when there is no school or district policy in place or when the policy is weaker than the censorship forces (Feiweil, Taylor, Caywood, Rochman, & Sutton, 1990; Noll, 1994). (An example of a strong, proactive censorship policy is included later in this article.) Too often teachers choose not to use certain books for fear that these texts will create controversies leading to confrontations with parents, the members of the wider community, or school administrators (Cerra, 1994; Noll, 1994). Many teachers' fears of censorship grow out of the lack of support they receive from their administration (building and district levels) and school board and the sense that they are "out there" by themselves. Often, teachers have not formed close enough relationships with colleagues at the middle and high school levels to garner peer support either. They feel isolated and powerless, and ultimately fear losing their jobs. In such cases, teachers succumb to the pressure to retreat behind the shield of other similar books that are less controversial, but that may not compel the students to see another perspective or think on a deeper level. Teacher self-censorship of classroom materials is further complicated by the paradoxical position many teachers find themselves in of believing in the power of literature and "espousing the freedom to read" (Cerra, 1994, p. 37), while at the same time finding excuses for choosing substitutes (Noll, 1994).

In addition to the fears of outside censorship of the books themselves, some teachers fear the "can of worms" that could open if they engage their students in discussions of controversial issues. They become concerned about making these texts relevant to parents and believe they have few avenues of communication for sharing with parents the benefits of having early adolescents wrestle

with social problems (Noll, 1994). Even though teachers may consider particular books as assets to their curriculum that would engage their students in deep, reflective response and conversation, they opt for safer titles, rationalizing that their students may not be able to handle the other material emotionally or psychologically. More honestly, they may feel ill equipped to guide their students in deep, reflective conversations.

***I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This:* A case in point**

Using the data and findings from two studies we conducted that focused on this particular piece of Social Issues Realism (Lukens, 1990), we show the need for teachers to "acknowledge to themselves the extent of silent [self] censorship in their reviewing and purchasing decisions" (Person, 1998, p. 120), and to become teachers who select literature rather than restrict its use and who sustain their professional right and responsibility to make decisions as advocates for their students' freedom to learn.

In one of the studies, the researcher read *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* (Woodson, 1994) aloud to a group of inservice teachers who then responded both in writing and through discussion to the novel itself, its value for adolescents, and their willingness to use it in their classrooms. In the other study, 11 seventh- and eighth-grade girls read *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* and discussed their responses with one another and the researcher.

The reading and discussion engaged in by the inservice teachers shows clearly the self-censorship paradox. The teachers demonstrated a keen awareness of the pedagogical importance of the power literature has to engage young people in deliberate questioning, genuine dialogue, and critical reflection, yet their feelings of insecurity pressured them into opting for a less provocative piece. This paradox is particularly striking in the following teacher's responses:

It could be intertwined through themes such as families and friendship, prejudice, and the loss of someone. It really makes the reader stop and evaluate the way things are.

I don't believe I would use this book because of all the controversy.

Although the middle school girls were aware of the controversy, they viewed it as part of the novel's significance and strength.

We begin with a brief description of the participants in the studies and an explication of *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*. We then discuss the implications of the teachers' and students' responses to the novel. Finally, we offer strategies for teachers to use that encourage and support the use of Social Issues Realism, and strategies that support a proactive stance toward the censorship of literature professionally selected for classroom use.

The participants. The 15 teachers who participated in the study were all middle level educators in a master's level Middle School Reading course at a local university. All 15 were white, middle to upper middle class women. The circumstances of their teaching assignments included rural, urban, and suburban environments. All but one taught in the public schools. One taught in a fifth-grade self-contained setting. One taught in a fifth- and sixth-grade multiage self-contained setting. Two were in a sixth-grade self-contained setting. Two were sixth-grade teachers in a middle school setting; one taught Language Arts and one taught Language Arts and Math. Two seventh-grade teachers taught Science and Social Studies and English respectively. One teacher taught seventh- and eighth-grade science. One teacher served as both the seventh- and eighth-grade Title I reading teacher. Of the remaining four teachers, two taught eighth-grade Science and two taught eighth-grade Math.

The participants in the other study consisted of 11 middle school girls, 6 seventh-graders and 5 eighth-graders. They represented a diversity of socioeconomic and ethnic groups. Their ages at the time of the study were 12 (4 girls), 13 (6 girls), and 14 (1 girl). All of the girls were identified as "readers" by their teachers, yet at different reading levels. All were involved in sports, academic clubs, or other extracurricular activities.

It is important to underscore that all of the participants in the two studies were female. It would be significant to look at the responses of male students and teachers as well to see if their responses would differ.

Reading the text. McCormick (1994) argued "that both texts and readers can be seen to possess

repertoires, a subset of the larger culture's discourses, beliefs, values, and ways of understanding the individual and the world" (p. 9). Given this argument, she suggested that students must learn to critically analyze their own and the text's cultural construction, which is a move beyond personal response to look at larger issues of ideology. A book such as *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* enables students to reach this depth of analysis in their sharing of responses and connections to the wider world.

I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This is the story of the deep and powerful friendship that develops between Marie and Lena, two girls living in the small town of Chauncey, Ohio. Lena, a white 12-year-old whose mother has died and whose father sexually abuses her, moves to Chauncey, Ohio, a predominantly black suburb of Athens, where people from a range of socioeconomic classes live. Lena enters school, where she immediately stands out. She is noticeable partly for being only one of a small number of white students, and also because she is considered "white trash," a term the character Sherry introduces within the first few chapters of the story. And Lena seems to agree with Sherry's judgment:

"I'm white trash," Lena said flatly, as though she had said this a hundred thousand times before or maybe heard it from a hundred thousand people. "White-trash," she said again, softer, as if the words were sinking in, finding a home somewhere inside of her. (Woodson, 1994, p. 19)

Marie is one of the most popular girls at school and, as she says, she and her friend Sherry have "gotten voted Best Dressed two years in a row, and we take that status seriously" (p. 18). Both come from affluent households, and while Sherry wants to ignore the "white girl," there is something about Lena that Marie can't "get a hold of." She is intrigued by Lena, and soon the two characters find they have something in common despite their apparent differences.

The two main characters' mothers are not part of their lives, and their fathers are not what Marie and Lena think fathers should be. While Lena's father loves her "too much," Marie's father has blocked all emotion since Marie's mother left them to explore the world. Marie's father does not hug,

kiss, or touch his daughter; thus, she feels that she has done something wrong.

This common bond leads Marie and Lena into a friendship that defies race and class lines, as well as social status and fatherly approval. Marie finds herself a pariah at school along with Lena, and both find that their fathers disapprove of interracial friendships, particularly theirs. Eventually Lena can no longer take her father's abuse. She also becomes frightened that her father will start to "bother" her younger sister Dion. When she tells Marie that she is planning on leaving, Marie doesn't want to believe her, just as she didn't want to believe Lena was being abused. Within 2 weeks, Lena and Dion are gone, as is their father, and Marie is left to ponder the changes she has gone through as a result of befriending Lena. Their friendship lasted less than an academic year, and Marie is not sure what it has meant to her, but she begins to question what she had always thought she knew about race and class relationships. Marie, while stating "that in three weeks it could be like Lena never was" (Woodson, 1994, p. 115) still believes that what she experienced was something rare: an incredible friendship.

I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This won several awards, including a Coretta Scott King Honor, an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, an ALA Notable Book, a Booklist Editors' Choice, and a Horn Book Fanfare. As one teacher in the study suggested, "This book touches upon the essence of children's thoughts, fears, dreams, and inner beliefs. The author has such a keen handle on what children experience and how they respond to one another."

Reading *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* created for the 11 girls an emotional and intellectual space where they could examine their feelings about race, class, and gender relationships across visible and not so visible cultural boundaries. It pushed all of the girls to think about their assumptions and attitudes toward others. By reading and discussing *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*, the participants had the opportunity to hear perspectives with which they were unfamiliar. This reading event provided the opportunity for "ideal experimentation"—vicarious experience where they could try out different lives (Rosenblatt, 1976). Although the teachers realized the viability and

the power of this "ideal experimentation," they remained fearful of its consequences.

Responding to the text. The teachers' and students' responses (both written and verbal) to *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* echoed one another in many ways as each addressed what the novel could offer as both a window and a mirror (Huck, 1990). The aspects that both groups found significant were as follows:

1. the personal identification with the character of Marie,
2. the intriguing nature of Lena and her life,
3. a connection with current concerns plaguing young adults in our society,
4. the nature of the interracial friendship, and
5. the issues of incest and sexual molestation.

There were also two ways in which the responses of the teachers and students differed. The first area of difference was the recognition of the racial conflicts in the novel as present day. As will be seen in detail later, many of the girls assumed at first that the novel took place "long ago," maybe even right after slavery was abolished. On the other hand, the teachers, while also confronted with a middle class black character befriending a hapless, poor white character, were aware that the book's setting was indeed contemporary.

The second area of difference centered on the controversial nature of the novel. While both groups saw the novel as controversial, the middle school girls recognized this as part of the book's importance. The teachers saw the controversies around the issues of racism and sexual molestation as necessitating self-censorship. As we have suggested, it was the controversial nature of the text that overpowered most of the teachers' strong inclinations to use the book and that led to self-censorship.

Students and teachers agree

In each of the five categories, the agreement between the groups of participants demonstrates clearly the novel's power to engage the reader and call forth personal and substantive reflection. For each category given below, we have juxtaposed the girls' and the teachers' responses to show that the teachers' understanding of the

pedagogical importance of the novel reverberates through the girls' discussion.

Personal identification with Marie. It is evident from the responses that both groups focused on Marie's strength and loyalty as traits to admire and emulate. Marie's willingness to be true to her friendship with Lena and her ability to act in opposition to peer pressure was significant to both groups of readers, who found connections to their own lives.

Student: More people have lives like that—dealing with racism like this.

Teacher: I also think it is neat how Marie is discovering herself. How she didn't want to "kiss anyone's butt," but she realized that was exactly what she was doing to Sherry. That is quite a discovery at this age when everyone is so reliant on what their peers think.

Student: I could picture myself like... like in Marie's position.

Teacher: Marie thought it was important to be friends with Sherry. Now that Lena has moved to town that friendship is being tested. I believe this is an important issue for this age level.... I believe she is dealing with what she believes is morally acceptable.

Student: I liked how she wouldn't stop being Lena's friend...but didn't carry this over into her own life at school or in her community. I think she tries to help people, and I think I would be nice to someone like, in that situation.

Teacher: As I grew older and decided that basketball wasn't what I wanted to play, our times [her father's and hers] together stopped. Just as Marie's father stopped touching her.

Student: She's the one that's like standing up for Lena even though it may cost her reputation. She's sticking up for her.

The moral implications of Marie's decision to remain Lena's friend are inherent in both the student and teacher responses. This is one of the issues of tremendous interest and concern to both early adolescents and their teachers. The fact that both groups admire Marie's independence and willingness to stand up for what she believes is right indicates that while peer pressure is a signifi-

cant force, it is not the only one. The implications of cost are also evident. In the adult world, trade-offs are often made and most decisions have both benefits and costs. One teacher identified with the cost of losing her father's attention once she made an independent decision, and one student recognized the potential for the loss of reputation. Being one's own person seems to be a positive force here, one recognized by both teachers and students as a powerful one in gaining adult independence.

Feelings about Lena. Both groups held positive feelings toward Lena. These feelings, however, were expressed as sympathy and awe rather than identification. Teachers and students were impressed by Lena's strength in dealing with her unspeakable situation.

Student: I think, I like how she was independent, kind of, and how she doesn't seem like she really tried to fit.... She knew what she was doing.

Teacher: Lena has a great sense of humor. I think her character as a new student and sort of the outcast is depicted so well. The anguish all junior high kids feel.

Student: She had a lot of courage. She was still hanging out with Marie even though Marie's friends would talk about her clothing and stuff. And I think Lena knew they were talking about her. But, I can't see how she would just still hang around with them. Like, I know this girl in school who deals with a lot of people making fun of her and stuff, and she still hangs around with the same people and deals with it.

Teacher: I feel bad all over for Lena.

Student: She kept trying. 'Cause she was really, like, brave and courageous and, I mean, she was independent. She took care of herself and she took care of Dion along with it. I mean—I mean, she's 13 years old.

Teacher: Lena is having quite the time—no wonder she has such a difficult time relating to other students. I can't imagine experiencing what she is going through.

Student: Well, I can never see myself in the position where Lena was in because it's hard. [If] people did that to me, I would get more physical, like I would punch and kick and scream, and I would run away

'cause I guess I have more courage. Because sometimes I would get so violent with my mother, but I would just stay on our property, but get out of the house, so we can just cool off. And I would stay away from people who did that, and I would tell people it was happening to me.

While both the teachers and the students maintain a kind of distance from Lena, there is an almost profound sense of respect and wonder at her courage and ability to care for not only herself, but her younger sister as well. Both groups used Lena's handling of her situation as an opportunity to explore the "what ifs" of life's suffering. It is particularly interesting that the last student's response involved speculating that she would use force to extricate herself from Lena's situation, but that she actually uses restraint in dealing with her own situation. The novel is giving her an opportunity to play both sides and, perhaps, come to some self-realizations.

Connection with current concerns plaguing young adults in society. The issues of racism, friendship and belonging, and family relationships are all ones that the girls and the teachers deal with daily in school. The book offers a way to discuss them on a deeper level.

Student: Like how it...was really, really into other people's lives and how life affects them. Oh, there's a girl like me in this book.

Teacher: There are so many issues that could be covered—divorce, death, incest, race... and these are all issues that need to be talked about because they are all happening now.

Student: By reading this book I'm learning how people act and how silly they are about racism.... Racism still exists and kids are involved in it...getting to know the other person before judging them.

Teacher: It was very apparent by the parents' actions, where prejudice begins. It is definitely something taught by others.

Student: I guess you kinda have to, like, take control of your own life in a way, 'cause you know, if Marie stayed with all the influence that she had, you know, she would've never learned about Lena.... I don't really think Lena would've left

without the influence that she got from Marie.

Teacher: What a shame that these two young ladies are discouraged from being friends and helping one another through life because they are different colors!

Student: This book makes me think in a lot of ways. Look on the inside, not just on the outside. And it's just saying that it doesn't matter what color you are to have friends. About blacks and whites I think they're saying there's always going to be that little wall, and so how are we going to break it? And I think they broke it right there by standing up for their friendship. I think friendship is more important than color.

The significance of friendship in spite of race and class is clear in the above responses. Both the teachers and the students are aware that U.S. society continues to struggle with racism and classism, but that both issues pale when the relationship of two particular people comes to the fore. The student who speaks metaphorically about friendship breaking down the wall that separates blacks and whites has reached a rather sophisticated understanding of the power of relationship. Also, the student who realizes that some of Lena's strength is gained through the influence of Marie and their friendship is beginning to explore the notion of relationship more deeply. The teachers' responses indicate that they see clearly the need for and the value of the kind of dialogue that the students are demonstrating.

Nature of the interracial friendship. The switch in the stereotype of poor black and well-to-do white was not lost on either the teachers or the girls. The connections between Marie and Lena transcend race and class in powerful ways that were right under the surface but somewhat hard to verbalize. The girls did not set out to be friends; they just found that they had much in common and liked as well as needed each other.

Student: This book is kind of weird because usually the black people are the ones no one wants to hang around with—not white.

Teacher: You seldom see or hear a story from this point of view, where the whites are the minority and the poor. But, Marie's father has the same preconceived notions about

poor white people as white people have about poor blacks.

Student: It was really good. It was like something totally different. I don't know, her mom, it's not like a happy, happy story, even though, I don't know, [Marie] seemed happy toward the end. I haven't read a book that had some African American and [white] girls trying to be friends in it. It's the environment, this society...they were struggling to be friends. So this has kind of like been a struggle to be friends, even though they turned out to be friends, and her dad—Marie's dad—didn't like it. So I thought that was pretty good.

Teacher: I like the fact that the black family is predominant in the book rather than a white. It's usually the other way.

Student: It was like a normal friendship, only not really normal friendship, but it's just like one was rich and one was poor. One was black, one was white. You know, it was kind of a different friendship because they weren't like best friends or anything; they were kind of snappy to each other sometimes.

Teacher: I like the triumph of the two girls—best friends even though they were so very different economically and socially. Kids are able to clock out “boundaries” to some extent.

Student: I didn't think it was like really that much of a friendship until, like, toward the end when she left 'cause they kept on fighting even though they thought that they were friends, you know? Both of 'em were saying that, you know. They were thinking that they might make really good friends or something, but, to me, throughout the story they were like really, I don't know, not friends 'cause they were arguing—or not arguing—but like getting mad at each other. So, I don't know. It just seemed like they were rude to each other, even though I guess they were. It was hard for them to go along, I guess, 'cause they were from different races even though they were the same with their mothers.

Teacher: There are so many stereotypes flying around in the book—labeling of people, places and situations. It seems that everyone knows negative connotations are

wrong and hurtful but still continues to use them.

Student: I mean, they had so much not in common, but the little bit that they did have in common made like a great friendship. And they had so many differences, but like with one thing that was, like, the same, with them, it just [meant] everything was great, you know, everything.

The importance of relating individual to individual and to seeing beyond the stereotypes is a significant issue here. It is clear that in U.S. society, the assumption is often that if there are two characters, one white and the other black, then the white one will be better off economically. The fact that in this story the reverse is true forces both the teachers and the students to confront this stereotype. It deepens the discussion of the interpersonal relationship between Lena and Marie which is first and foremost based on the similarities of their home lives. It is far more important to both of them that they have lost their mothers and have dysfunctional relationships with their fathers, than that they are of different socioeconomic groups and different races. These two girls can speak to each other in unique ways, Lena because she has no one else, and Marie because none of her social set could possibly understand.

Issues of incest and sexual molestation. Both the teachers and the girls skirted these issues. Only one student referred to Lena's secret as "sexual." The other girls used language such as "the problem she had," or "what was happening to her," or "abuse," or "I just couldn't believe what was happening to her." The girls talked about Lena and her father in ways that demonstrated they knew what Lena was going through, but they did not want to discuss the issue directly. They did not excuse Lena's father from the incest, but rather saw that Lena was justified and brave for leaving. Many participants said that Lena should have reported the abuse, and tried to understand why she did not. The teachers also used euphemisms for the sexual abuse Lena endured (e.g., "too much or improper attention"). They also were disturbed that Lena kept the abuse to herself.

Student: This book made me think that one of my friends is having the same problem as Lena, and it's kind of hard to talk about

it. Because if it's not true, she might say "Why are you accusing me of that?" you know? And if I'm right she'll start crying, and I won't know what to say. The counselors don't have a good reputation here. I wouldn't go to them for my problems, let's say that.

Teacher: It was just depressing because you think things like that are going on right now, and sometimes you don't know about it or you can't help. Kids come to school with a lot of baggage that they don't need to deal with, and then we expect them to do all sorts of stuff. I strongly feel that this topic needs somehow to be dealt with. Awareness for the students that they can talk to people who can help them. I think that they need to feel that they can trust someone who won't hurt them and that what a parent is doing is wrong. Try to make them understand that the person is not bad, but [the] behavior is wrong and they need help.

The fact that neither the teachers nor the students could deal with these two issues in any depth reflects a truly depressing aspect of U.S. society. The lack of willingness to deal with sexual molestation in any real way makes it virtually impossible for the victims to reach out in ways that are healthy and that could protect them. It is also ironic that while the teachers could not talk about the abuse in any real way, they were disturbed that Lena kept it to herself and did not reach out.

Students and teachers disagree

In this section, we see how the girls' and the teachers' historical perspectives and their views of the controversial issues create differences in the two groups' responses to the book.

Racial conflict as current. Current racist attitudes and practices in the U.S. are often ignored in classrooms. Students learn about slavery, Jim Crow laws, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights Movement. For many, racism stopped when Martin Luther King, Jr. died. In schools, students do not often look at current events such as the burning of crosses and churches, hate-graffiti written on walls, or acts of violence committed against minorities. In classrooms, they are not often invited to discuss

the racist culture that still exists today. So, while the girls noticed “the oddity” of the black character being middle class and the white character being poor, they did not know how to place it in contemporary society and talk about it as such.

Student: Maybe they’re stuck back in the time when that still happened. The whole community could be stuck back in time. I don’t see their friendship as a problem because of their races.

Student: [She thought the book took place] maybe just a little after it [slavery days]. Because I don’t, the black people were free at Chauncey, or the place where they were living, and some white people were living there, and it was kind of like, a ghost town and nobody was slaves, but the people still—blacks and whites—still hated each other. They just weren’t slaves anymore.

Student: I think it took, probably took place like really toward the beginning, not the beginning, but like, I don’t know, probably around the [19]70s or 60s probably. But they had cars, so it’s probably around the 70s, 60s, or something like that.

On the other hand, all of the teachers’ responses place the book in the present. The following teacher’s response is typical of the way the teachers saw the contemporary influences of racism in the book.

Teacher: There are so many stereotypes flying around in the book—labeling of people, places, and situations. It seems that everyone knows negative connotations are wrong and hurtful but still continue to use them. Marie’s dad, for example.

Controversy. The girls only use the word *controversy* in relation to the book once, as seen in the following example. The teachers, on the other hand, focused quite a bit of their attention on the controversy the book might create.

Student: I really like it! I like her narrative and how she told in the story where...it was really neat, like the controversy of like more of a black town and a white girl in it. And her friends—just since she was

poor and another girl was more rich and popular.

Teacher: I don’t believe I would use this book because of all the controversy.

Teacher: Would my administrator support it? Probably not. He seems to be a genuine coward about most issues this year.

Teacher: I could see the sexual abuse as being a problem for parents and administrators, even though we are trying to teach kids about being touched, and telling someone. Yet these same people in society would probably have a problem with a story on this subject being read to their children.

Teacher: Unfortunately, I don’t think “everyone” involved would allow the book, even though it deals with real issues that may be affecting children in our classrooms.

Teacher: This book would be a big problem to teach in most schools due to the “touched me” parts—some people are closed to the idea that this stuff occurs.

Teacher: I would most definitely *not* use this book in my classroom, but it sure has awakened me to the importance of censoring my own books before using them in my classroom. I suppose I could use bits and pieces of this book to teach lessons about racism, classism, and interpersonal relationships. The parts of the book about sexual abuse are very sensitive issues and should not be addressed with an entire class by reading a book aloud. Maybe a social worker or school counselor could use this book on a one-on-one basis with a student. The book is very much related to what a lot of students go through especially with more and more fathers being the sole parent.

This last teacher’s response is particularly disturbing as she found the reading and discussion of *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* to be a red flag signaling further self-censorship. It seems evident that she feels ill equipped to delve into controversial issues with her students. The important point to note here is that her focus could more productively be on learning how to select and use pieces of literature rather than on expanding her self-censorship.

It is distressing that all of the teachers (with one exception) were willing to self-censor this book when it is the controversy in it that makes it a

powerful tool to equip young adolescents with the kind of understandings and critical thinking that allow the "Lenas" in our classrooms to speak up. Through reading and discussing this book, teachers and students could truly begin to grapple with solutions to the problems of racism, classism, and abuse of various kinds that currently plague U.S. society.

Strategies for using Social Issues Realism in the classroom

If the goal of literature selection is to educate rather than indoctrinate our students, teachers must provide multiple opportunities for their students to think deeply and to respond honestly. In order to make the most of these experiences, teachers need confidence in their abilities to facilitate and guide their students' reflection and discussion, so that the students are provided with knowledge and understandings of not only what is now, but also what could be and what should be in a world where equitable pluralism and democracy are the reality. Although Social Issues Realism in literature is a powerful tool for discussion in classrooms, teachers must be careful not to diminish the story's impact by using the novel for skill building purposes. Often good literature is treated as part of a basal system (Noll & Goodman, 1995), which can destroy the authenticity of the reading event. To read such powerful texts and then limit student responses and insights solely to recall questions does little to help students wrestle with the deeper issues in the books. As many readers know, it is not only the reading of the book that causes us to grow, it is also the social act of discussing the literature with peers and adults that makes for a greater understanding and more democratic process (Pradl, 1996).

Teacher study groups. As the examination of the middle school teachers' and students' responses to *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* indicate, educators should seek diligently to avoid self-censorship. Teachers need to support one another in "confronting their own biases, values, prejudices and predispositions, scrutinize them, and make the effort not to let these emotions interfere with their purchasing [or instructional] decisions" (Person, 1998, p. 120). Currently, teacher study groups are formed to help teachers find more effective teach-

ing methods and strategies for their classrooms. Using teacher study groups is a practical and efficient way to learn about the multitude of texts and strategies available for engaging students in dynamic studies about social issues within the United States. Through study groups, teachers have the opportunity to share their concerns about the realistic and sensitive issues found within realistic fiction as well as to equip themselves with rationales for using this literature in their classrooms. They can also use the opportunity study groups provide to engage in literature discussions themselves. This opportunity would allow them to explore the value of using specific pieces of literature with particular groups of students.

Journals. Journal keeping has become an often used strategy in many middle level classrooms for a number of purposes (Atwell, 1998; Rief, 1992). Having students write responses to literature in journals can be an effective way for teachers to access and assess student thinking about the first reading of a book, as well as student responses as discussions take place. Journal entries allow teachers to understand and acknowledge the personal connections that their students are making, and they can often provide information the teachers need to better guide the ensuing discussion. Journal keeping also allows teachers to become aware of, and to handle, extremely sensitive issues that may arise on an individual basis. Journals can take many forms depending on students' needs. Some journals are purely personal and, as such, highly confidential, while others may take the form of written conversations between the student and the teacher or between two or more students.

Literature circles. Learning to organize and facilitate literature circles (Daniels, 1994; Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996) is essential for teachers if they are to provide opportunities for their students to fully experience a piece of literature. Literature circles create the space for an "in-depth critical reading" (Huck, 1990, p. 8) that allows participants to engage authentically with a story. Circles allow students to discuss their personal responses to the story while also hearing other views in relation to that piece of literature. The role of the teacher in literature discussion moves back and forth between participant and guide (Freedman, 1993). As a participant, the teacher can demonstrate ways of

expressing ideas and perspectives as well as ways of disagreeing and offering alternative views. As a guide, the teacher can point out discrepancies, clarify misunderstandings, and explain new concepts.

Interdisciplinary collaboration. One distinct advantage of teaming in middle level schools is the opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration (Beane, 1993). When all team members acknowledge the significance of a piece of literature, and they can make reference to it and encourage the students to see its value across their studies, the power of the literature (as well as the support of the team members for one another) is enhanced. The use of Social Issues Realism in advisory programs can also produce more lively and critical discussions for students involved in these programs and can ultimately lead to the students taking community action. Literature often works as a catalyst in the discussion of the real problems plaguing many young people. With the distance that literature allows through fictional characters and situations, adolescents can wrestle with their own thinking, behaviors, and experiences.

Guest speakers. Another classroom strategy teachers might use, along with Social Issues Realism, is to invite guest speakers who can talk more knowledgeably and perhaps more persuasively to middle level students about the issues connected to the text under study. Many community programs brought into middle schools deal with issues of sexuality, alcohol and drug use, and abuse. Social Issues Realism can bring these issues to the surface for many students and, in combination with community programs or individuals who can ex-

pand upon them, create more powerful learning opportunities for many students.

Keeping parents in the loop. One way to help parents understand the relevance of Social Issues Realism for their middle level students is through surveys (Johnson, 1995). Surveys provide a bridge between teacher and parents that, once used, can be most effective to build trust among the teacher, parents, and students. Upon analysis of the surveys, teachers can establish a more responsive classroom curriculum that includes parent and student voices. By sharing survey results with parents, teachers can also invite them into a discussion of important issues. It is the building of community on this wider level that can increase student and classroom support throughout the year.

Strategies for a proactive stance toward censorship

Teachers must use proactive strategies rather than reactive self-censorship in responding to the threat of censorship. The suggestion made most widely by experts and anticensorship advocates is that districts and schools adopt censorship policies that require potential censors to put complaints in writing and go through a series of discussions before books can be removed from library or classroom shelves.

Teachers and librarians consistently report that the existence of a written selection policy statement often serves to deflect and diffuse censorship attempts. When classroom teachers or librarians, with the cooperation of principals and other school administrators, can point to a specific item in the selection policy, would-be censors are most often stopped in their efforts. If an attempt goes one step higher to a school district office where another written selection policy is produced, most attempts at censorship end. (Person, 1998, p.120-121)

Teachers must be empowered to choose proactively by gaining understanding of both the valid criteria for selection (see Figure 1) and their school or district censorship policy (see Figure 2). If proactive policies do not exist, teachers need to provide administrators with models to follow, participate in parent-teacher organizations, attend school board meetings, and share the many prototypes of

FIGURE 1
Selection criteria

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1. Ample possibilities for intertextuality.
 2. Connection in some immediate way with the lives and experiences of the students.
 3. Variety of perspectives for making sense of the world.
 4. Compelling story that generates a strong aesthetic response as well as efferent understanding of the issues involved.
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FIGURE 2
Citizen's request for reconsideration of a work

Author _____
 Paperback _____ Hardback _____

Title _____

Publisher (If known) _____

Request initiated by _____

Telephone _____ Address _____

City _____ Zip Code _____

Complainant represents
 _____ Himself/Herself
 _____ (Name Organization) _____
 _____ (Identify other group) _____

1. Have you been able to discuss this work with the teacher or librarian who ordered it or who used it?
 _____ Yes _____ No

2. What do you understand to be the general purpose for using this work?
 a. Provide support for a unit in the curriculum?
 _____ Yes _____ No
 b. Provide a learning experience for the reader in one kind of literature?
 _____ Yes _____ No
 c. Other _____

3. Did the general purpose for the use of the work, as described by the teacher or librarian, seem a suitable one to you?
 _____ Yes _____ No

4. What do you think is the general purpose of the author in this book? _____

5. In what ways do you think a work of this nature is not suitable for the use the teacher or librarian wishes to carry out? _____

6. Have you been able to learn what is the students' response to this work?
 _____ Yes _____ No

7. What response did the students make? _____

8. Have you been able to learn from your school library what book reviewers or other students of literature have written about this work?
 _____ Yes _____ No

9. Would you like the teacher or librarian to give you a written summary of what book reviewers and other students have written about this book or film?
 _____ Yes _____ No

10. Do you have negative reviews of the book?
 _____ Yes _____ No

11. Where were they published? _____

12. Would you be willing to provide summaries of the reviews you have collected?
 _____ Yes _____ No

13. What would you like your library/school to do about this work?
 _____ Do not assign/lend it to my child.
 _____ Return it to the staff selection committee or department for reevaluation.
 _____ Other—Please explain. _____

14. In its place, what work would you recommend that would convey as valuable a picture and perspective of the subject treated? _____

Signature _____

Date _____

From National Council of Teachers of English, 1982, pp.12-13. Reprinted by permission.

ensorship policies that have been developed by professional education organizations (for examples, see Brinkley, 1999; Bushman & Bushman, 1997). As Weiss (1995) suggested, "While input from the community might be desirable, final decisions about selection of methods and materials to be used should lie with professionals" (p. 29).

From the guidelines given in Figure 1, it is evident that *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* is indeed a meaningful choice for a middle level literature classroom. Both the teacher and adolescent participants in our studies agreed that the book is a powerful generator of thinking and discussion and has the potential to bring about needed growth and development in the world views of today's young people.

Seek literature to challenge students

Self-censorship shirks our obligation as teachers to facilitate our students' abilities to

read closely, to persevere in the face of uncertainty and ask questions of what...was [read]—not with downcast eyes, but freely, aloud, realizing there is no such thing as an open book...to see what talking a particular kind of talk would...do with a thorny philosophical problem. (Rose, 1989, p. 58)

As Noddings (1997) suggested, the literature we share with our students should inspire them to a virtuous life. It should "lead them to depth of thinking, moral sensitivity, social awareness, and tolerance for ambiguity." In order for this to occur, we must engage our students in reading literature that accurately—controversies and all—reflects the world in which they live. The value of discussing these controversies was not refuted by the teachers, as the following composite of their comments demonstrates.

The book is so very appropriate for middle school students. There are themes of race, bigotry, prejudice, divorce, abandonment, adolescence, and friendship. The type of conversation that occurred in Chapter 8 is a daily happening. Friendship and identity are such huge issues driving adolescents. My students could sympathize for sure with Marie. I think a lot of students might be struggling with feelings of abandonment. You could talk about what feelings Marie is having and why she is having these feelings. I really like the story. It is ad-

ressing a lot of important issues. I believe it really is making you feel what Marie is feeling, that she was to blame for her mother leaving. The author has a keen handle on what children experience and how they respond to one another. Children are taught to hide their tears, but to say the very thing that could cut deep and cause another's tears. Adolescents, young and old, could easily relate to this book. So many issues were addressed here. Lots of issues to be used as springboards for discussion. The language is really quite realistic.

It is clear, then, that there is an inherent paradox in the ways that teachers think about protecting (i.e., informing, educating, arming) their students and protecting (i.e., shielding, avoiding, disarming) themselves as teachers. It is also clear that the practice of simply substituting a less controversial book solves nothing. We must seek out fiction that asks students to wrestle with their own value systems, that depicts young adolescents making and sustaining strong friendships across racial lines, and that allows them to emulate the protagonist. It is this kind of examination, connection, and desire to emulate that provides one of the strongest mediating tools (Vygotsky, 1978) adults have at their disposal. As teachers, we must take our professional responsibilities seriously and make proactive decisions on behalf of our students.

We have used only one book to make our case for the commitment to selection. There are many other books that teachers continue to self-censor and that thus go unread. Literature response and discussion are essential ingredients in our students' development of the knowledge and understandings necessary to fulfill their roles in a participatory democracy. In the words of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler (Konigsberg, 1987),

I think you should learn, of course, and some days you must learn a great deal. But you should also have days when you allow what is already in you to swell up inside of you until it touches everything. And you can feel it inside you. If you never take time out to let that happen, then you just accumulate facts, and they begin to rattle around inside of you. You can make noise with them, but never really feel anything with them. It's hollow. (p. 150)

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